

## YOU ARE A SOMEBODY

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Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world."<sup>i</sup> Can you understand the enormity of that? "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world."

Several years ago, I witnessed The Reverend Jesse Jackson, a black civil rights activist and one-time candidate for the Presidency of the United States, speaking, or should I say preaching, to a large group of people in a northern American city. There was no podium, pulpit or lectern. Jackson walked up and down a long stage that extended into the crowd holding the microphone in his hand. His message was simple, "You are a somebody." "You are a somebody," he called. The agitated throng around him thundered in response, "I am a somebody." Over and over again, Jackson called out, "You are a somebody." Over and over again, they responded, "I am a somebody." Over and over again, these insignificant, unimportant, poor inhabitants of the ghetto responded triumphantly, "I am a somebody," as if they really believed it, as if they really were somebody.

Most of us, I'm sure, have more conservative tastes in preaching. We distrust such displays of emotion as merely the result of psychological hype or showbusiness enthusiasm. Yet we recognize that behind all that enthusiasm and bravado, beneath all that passion, they are absolutely right. They are somebodies. They are somebodies, not because Jackson says so, not because they say so, not because of who they are, but because of whose they are. Jesus Christ has called them in the ghetto from the ghetto, from the tenement buildings, from the back alleys, from the poor jobs. And they have answered Christ's call. They are Christ's. They are somebodies.

Thus, it was with Jesus as he began the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gathered around him that day on the mount those ordinary, everyday people he had called to be his disciples, as well as a multitude of others who were also ordinary, even less than ordinary. They were not the makers of history, but the insignificant. Not the prime movers of finance, nor the architects of industry, but rather the nameless. Nonetheless, Jesus said to them, as he says to us now, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." "The whole world will be salted by you. The whole world will be lit by you. The whole world will need to reckon with you. Industry, finance, culture, politics, religion will be influenced by you and your power. You are somebody."

Can we comprehend the enormousness of this? It sounds like foolishness, but from it comes the soaring passion and the incredible self-confidence of the Christians that we are somebodies.

Now, of course, this self-confidence comes not from ourselves. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "Let those who boast, boast of the Lord."<sup>iii</sup> God alone is power. It is God who gives power to the weak. It is God who is powerful in the weak. This is the truth behind Jesus' promises, behind Jackson's claim, that in them, in us, God is so powerful, so mighty, that the earth quakes and trembles throughout history even to the present day.

You can feel this in the pages of the Bible. Remember Jesus, the young foolish Galilean, standing before Pontius Pilate, representative of all the power of the world. How dare he, this Jesus, confront the powers and principalities! How dare he stand there defiant, firm as if he is somebody! How easily Pilate washed his hands of it. You can almost hear him dismiss it all and call for the next case. Yet even then the earth begins to tremble and quake. It is as if a giant ocean liner has begun to shake with the pounding of the powerful engines within. This Galilean would not allow himself to be dismissed. The sky would cloud over; the earth would shake with thunder; the temple curtain would be rent in two. "Next case," Pilate said. There would be a next case. And a next. And a next. A multitude of

next cases would come. Hundreds. Thousands of martyrs. Disciples. The salt of the earth. The light of the world. Nobodies would be dragged before the rulers of the world. Followers of an invisible Lord seeking justice. Nobodies, yet somebodies, a force to be reckoned with. It was too late. The salt was spilled, and nobody could put it back again. The power of God had lit the lamps of the disciples and no one could extinguish them.

This is what Jesus was talking about. The disciples of Christ, the Christians, have greatness within them, borrowed greatness it is true, but greatness all the same. It is the greatness of God, but it is within you. Because of the power of God, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." "You are a somebody."

Do you feel like a somebody? Do you feel like a power to be reckoned with in the world? Are you the salt of the earth purifying it, preserving it, preventing decay, seasoning it to bring alive the flavours of life? How many of us see ourselves as the light of the world brightening lives with rainbow colours, illuminating dark corners, bringing the truth, showing the way, revealing the glory of God? How many of those crying people in the congregation of Jesse Jackson went home and lived when the emotion waned as if they really were somebody? When people look at the church, our church, at us, at Christians, do they see a light? Do they feel the power of God?

"You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." You are somebody. Privilege bears responsibility.

Georges Bernanos in his novel *The Diary of a Country Priest* said that it is significant that Jesus did not say, "You are the honey of the world," but rather, "You are the salt of the earth." <sup>iii</sup> Too often Jesus is portrayed as gentle Jesus meek and mild, and Christians as mushy and sickeningly sweet. The church then becomes a honeypot of life and Christianity a kind of have-a-nice-day religion. People turn away from such religion. People who live in the real world know that life isn't soft and easy. It is more decent to bear the bitterness than to sugar-coat it.

We are, however, not the honey but the salt of the earth. Salt bites. It stings wounds, but in the stinging it heals. I remember as a boy on a trip to Nova Scotia I was walking around the chicken coop, and I stepped on a rusty nail, which I would think was coated with more than rust. It went through my sneaker into my foot. To get the poison out they used a fish poultice. The salt in the fish was used to clean and purify the wound, and to draw the poison out. And it stung.

The Church if it is to be the Church and faithful to Christ must resist the temptation to sugar-coat the word and thereby sweeten the world. Jesus wasn't crucified for being too sweet but for touching the sore spots of life. He brought a sense of reality that the world didn't like. He broke the bubbles of our illusions with the sting of salt but in that sting there is healing.

As a Christian and as a preacher, I don't expect that the church will always follow my way. I am not Christ. I, as an individual, do not know the will of God and the will of Christ in any way that approaches perfection. I will expect to be stung sometimes. I expect that I will not always like what the church says and how the church acts. My first inclination, however, is, or at least should be, to question my own understanding. The gift of the Holy Spirit is made not just to individuals but to the church as a body. I may, like Luther and Wesley and Knox, eventually find it necessary to leave the church, but my first reaction should be to examine myself and the sting of the salt to discover my own wounds. If I find that I am always in agreement with the church, then either I am awfully lucky, or something is terribly wrong. The church is called to be the salt, not the honey, of the world of which I am part. And the message will sometimes sting. But in the sting, it is also the healing of God and new growth in the Spirit.

Then too, salt is a preservative preventing the decay of the world. The church should be very concerned with the state of western civilization.

I hope that most of us are disturbed about what we see in the world today. The rise of hatred manifest in all the isms and

phobias, like racism and Islamophobia, is all around us. Politicians seem to be more concerned about scoring points against perceived adversaries than caring about the people that claim to care about. Social media disperse misinformation and falsehood at a speed never before known in human history. Our society is splitting into those who have too much and those who have too little, with the middle class gradually vanishing.

We need to be concerned. We are called to immunize society against decay and decline, and to preserve that which is noble and deserving of preservation. "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." "You are a somebody."

But how can we do that? What impact can we have? We are so few. Often, we are alone, strangers in an alien world. It is fine to speak this way when we gather together and have each other's support but what about when we go back into the real world? What then?

The individual Christian is crucially important. Imagine what happens when one person refuses to laugh at a crude joke or to participate in an cruel trick, when one person remains calm in a panic, when one person stands up for her faith when others are scared, when one person forgives in a situation of enmity and anger. The situation is seasoned with fidelity, with peace, with faith, with healing. Without that person, prejudice, fear, faithlessness, and hatred would have ruled.

What we need to do is to get out of the saltshaker. Salt is no good unless it mixes with the dough. The church and Christians are no good unless we mix with the world, not of the world, but in the world.<sup>iv</sup>

Likewise with light, if we keep our light under a bushel, it goes out from lack of oxygen. When we bring our light into the world the embers of faith will be kindled into flame with the winds of God's Spirit. Only through exercise and use are the muscles of faith made strong and hard, and capable of their greatest effectiveness.

There is a difference between salt and light, however, which is perhaps why the two images are put together. Each indicates a different way of being faithful.

Salt has its effect upon the world in secret. Those who are the salt of the earth act in quiet, unobtrusive ways. Light, on the other hand, has its influence in a bright obvious way. The light of the world acts in open, public and political ways. We are called to both, as individual Christians and as a Church.

“You are the salt of the earth” called to season that bit of earth entrusted to you. “You are the light of the world” in order to bring a glimmer to the places you touch. You are a somebody, God acting in you to make a difference. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 5: 13, 14.

<sup>ii</sup> 1 Corinthians 1: 31.

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted in Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, Fortress Press, 1963, p. 27.

<sup>iv</sup> Romans 12: 2; John 17.